

Parental violence before, during and after COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract: It's not clear if and how social distancing measures to control COVID-19 transmission may result in more occurrences of child and adolescent abuse perpetrated by their parents. Information often comes from indirect estimates and media reports. More evidence is needed from multiple sources, particularly from the potential victims. The aim of this study was to compare the proportion of violence perpetrated on adolescents by their parents before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown in Portugal. Three different samples with adolescents aged 12–18 years were collected before ($n = 1444$), during ($n = 1427$) and after ($n = 794$) the lockdown and compared to verify variations concerning parental violence behaviors. Higher rates of aggressive parental behavior were found, but results showed that adolescents reported a reduction of psychological, physical, and sexual violence perpetrated by their parents during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Implications and future research needs are discussed.

Keywords: *Abusive parents; Adolescents; Adverse childhood experiences; Maltreatment; COVID-19.*

Violência parental antes, durante e depois do confinamento devido à COVID-19: Não existe evidência se as medidas de distanciamento social para controlar a transmissão da COVID-19 resultaram em mais ocorrências de violência parental. As informações sobre este problema decorrem de estimativas indiretas e de relatórios provenientes dos media. Importa, assim, recorrer a múltiplas fontes, particularmente das potenciais vítimas. Procurou-se neste estudo comparar a proporção de violência perpetrada sobre adolescentes antes, durante e após o período de confinamento devido à COVID-19 em Portugal. Três amostras diferentes com adolescentes entre os 12 a 18 anos foram recolhidas antes ($n = 1444$), durante ($n = 1427$) e após ($n = 794$) o confinamento e comparadas posteriormente para verificar variações na violência parental. Verificou-se a prática de agressões por parte dos pais, relatando os adolescentes ao mesmo tempo uma redução da violência psicológica, física e sexual durante e após o confinamento pela COVID-19. São discutidas as implicações deste estudo em termos práticos e de investigação.

Palavras-chave: *Pais abusivos; Adolescentes; Experiências adversas na infância; Maus tratos; COVID-19.*

In December 2019, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) emerged in China, and COVID-19 has become a pandemic. Home confinement, school closure and other restrictive physical distancing measures were imposed to slow the spread of new cases of infection. According to UNESCO (2020), as of April 14th, 188 countries around the world have closed schools nationwide, affecting over 1.5 billion students, with many transiting to home-based education models. Some researchers (Brooks et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Ragavan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) have emphasized that these social distancing measures (such as lockdown) during the outbreaks might have negative effects on children. However, the only experience to date comes from the impact of the Ebola virus disease outbreak in some African countries (United Nations, 2014), when school closures meant social isolation and, accordingly, increased exposure to family violence and exploitation (Rosenthal & Thompson, 2020; van Gelder et al., 2020).

Parental violence includes witnessing parental conflict, as well as direct violence toward children (Kim & Lee, 2018) that may be psychological, sexual, physical, or economic aggression. A child who saw or heard parental conflict was formerly only described as a “witness” or an “observer”. However, because of the serious implications of this exposure, it has gradually been considered a form of parental violence (Chan et al., 2021; Evans et al. 2008; Graham-Bermann & Hughes, 2003). In this study, the definition of parental violence includes direct violence toward children. Considering the pandemic situation, studies have been

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carried out about the impact of COVID-19 in the context of domestic violence (e.g., Hsu & Henke, 2020) and/or family violence (e.g., Every-Palmer et al., 2020; Labrum et al., 2020). Nonetheless, no research has been found on the impact of COVID-19 on parental practices during or post lockdown and it's not clear if and how social distancing measures to control COVID-19 transmission may result in more occurrences of child and adolescent abuse perpetrated by their parents (Marmor et al., 2021). Information to date has come from indirect estimates and media reports (Ragavan et al., 2020). Although some data (Ministère de L'intérieur, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020) has shown a rise in child abuse warnings, other information suggests the number of child abuse and neglect hotline reports declined during lockdown (Marmor et al., 2021). COVID-19 has radically changed the lives of individuals. Besides being required to stay the whole day with partners, people were required to stay away from others who could validate their experiences and give help (Mazza et al., 2020; Ragavan et al., 2020), making it difficult to detect possible issues. Despite this justification, it remains unclear what impact the lockdown had on a possible increase in violence perpetrated by parents. More evidence is needed from multiple sources, particularly from the potential victims. Filling this gap in knowledge is an important step in obtaining better information and evidence.

This study aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on violent parental practices during or post lockdown. The main aim of this research report is to help psychologists, as well as child and adolescent protection practitioners, to better understand and respond to the specific child and adolescent abuse risks during future outbreaks, and answer the question: did the COVID-19 lockdown in Portugal influence the prevalence of violent parental practices?

The current study was conducted from April 2020 in Portugal, and the initial strategy was to ask adolescents directly about parental violence victimization. This data was compared with the same variables collected in a pre-COVID-19 period. Concerning the period of time identification; in Wave 1, we asked the participants to focus on the last 12 months; in Wave 2 (during lockdown), they were asked to focus on the previous 45 days. In Wave 3 (after the end of lockdown), we asked them to focus on the previous 50 days.

METHOD

Study Design

The surprise and urgency of nationwide lockdown made it difficult to establish specific methodologies to determine a clear effect of parental violence perpetration (e.g., longitudinal assessment of same samples), making other operational strategies necessary. For this study, three different samples were assessed (see Figure 1). The first assessment (*Wave 1 - before the COVID-19 lockdown sample*) was completed during the last trimester of 2019. This first survey is derived from a larger project, the Interpersonal Violence Prevention Program (PREVINT; <https://www.prevint.pt/en>). This is a validated psychological intervention program (Barroso et al., 2019) and very well-articulated within Portuguese schools (22000 students included). At that time, coronavirus (and COVID-19) was identified, but not yet a public health emergency of national or international concern. In March, when the COVID-19 spread was declared a national emergency, PREVINT started contacting schools again to ask their students to complete a second and third assessment.

Wave 1 (*before the COVID-19 lockdown sample*) was collected throughout Portuguese territory between September and December 2019. Wave 2 (*during the COVID-19 lockdown sample*) was collected between April 27th and April 30th (after 40 to 43 days of home confinement). Wave 3 (*after the COVID-19 lockdown sample*) was collected June 22nd - 26th, approximately 50 days after the end of lockdown and, consequently, the cessation of home confinement. Wave 1 was carried out in schools throughout the national territory, with the next two Waves using the same regions/schools.

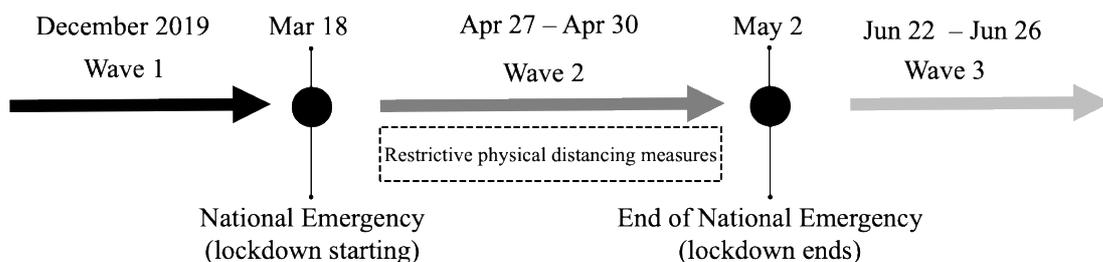


Figure 1. Survey timeline. Governmental restrictive physical distancing measures imposed to slow the spread of new cases of infection includes home confinement and school closure.

Participants

Wave 1 (*before the COVID-19 lockdown*) was collected throughout the nation between September and December 2019. When a survey on a sensitive topic (Krumpal, 2013) is being conducted, such as violent behavior perpetration and victimization, particularly when using online based surveys, it's important to control social desirability bias. Social desirability is a type of response bias in which participants report behaviors that others consider positive, whether or not they are right. This is particularly important in online recruitment and with specific populations, like adolescents. It can result in response related sources of error and in an overreporting of positive behaviors and underreporting of negative ones. This sample, initially composed of 2421 participants, was therefore screened for social desirability (SDS - Social Desirability Scale; Almiro et al., 2016), with 977 individuals with high social desirability eliminated (40.3% of the sample). Their tendency was to respond with what was socially desirable instead their actual situation. The final sample was thus composed of 1444 school age adolescents, aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 14.0$; $SD = 1.57$), 740 females (51.2%) and 704 males (48.8%) from Portuguese schools. For Wave 2 (*during the COVID-19 lockdown sample*), a data survey was carried out using the same procedure as in Wave 1. For the present study, and in order to guarantee the region / school proportions at national level, in Wave 2, only participants who corresponded to those same regions in Wave 1 were selected. Thus, the preliminary sample of Wave 2 was composed of 2040 adolescents, and after having eliminated the participants with social desirability criteria (30% of the initial sample of Wave 2) the final sample of the second Wave was composed of 1427 participants (98% of Wave 1 respondents), aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 14.3$; $SD = 1.77$), 827 female (58.0%) and 600 males (42.0%; see details in Table 1) from Portuguese schools. Lastly, for Wave 3 (*after the COVID-19 lockdown*) the same sampling procedures were performed, taking into account regional proportion and social disability criteria. Wave 3 was composed of 794 adolescents (56 % of Wave 2 respondents), aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 14.4$; $SD = 1.85$), 476 females (59.9%) and 318 males (40.1%) from Portuguese schools. Thus, although different, the samples have participants from the same national educational institutions and from the same age group.

Table 1. Descriptive main variables

	Before the COVID-19 Lockdown (December 2019)	During the COVID-19 Lockdown	After the COVID-19 lockdown
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Total of Participants	1444	1427	794
Sex			
Boys	704 (48.8%)	600 (42.0%)	318 (40.1%)
Girls	740 (51.2%)	827 (58.0%)	476 (59.9%)
Mean age (<i>SD</i>)	$M = 14.0$ ($SD = 1.57$)	$M = 14.3$ ($SD = 1.77$)	$M = 14.4$ ($SD = 1.85$)
Family violence victimization (by parents)	453 (31.4%)	389 (27.3%)	189 (23.8%)
Type of violence			
Psychological (e.g.: Blaming, Lying or Deceiving)	450 (29.2%*)	366 (25.6%*)	170 (21.4%*)
Physical (e.g.: Slapping, Hurting, Kicking)	396 (27.4%*)	258 (18.1%*)	102 (12.8%*)
Sexual (e.g.: Forcing sexual intercourse, Rape)	34 (2.4%*)	11 (0.8%*)	4 (0.5%*)

Note. * Percentage of the total sample

Procedure

The participants were students from Portuguese schools. In parallel to the PREVINT intervention process, data about interpersonal violence (e.g., violence perpetrated by parents; dating violence) was collected periodically with a survey conducted online, always having obtained all the official authorization and adolescent and parental consent. In addition to the institutional authorization from the Portuguese Ministry of Education, all participants were informed of the goals of the study and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses were guaranteed. The research protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro. Data was collected through computer-assisted self-reports on school computers (or smartphones, when authorized) during regular classes by using an Internet-based survey hosted on a secure institutional server. Participation in this research was voluntary and did not imply any monetary payment or delivery of material goods. Since the lockdown

involved distance learning and frequent email contact with students, school officials were asked to send their students a request to collaborate on this research project by email.

Instruments

Inventory of Interpersonal Violence (IVI). The IVI (Barroso et al., in press) is an inventory that allows the identification of victimization and/or perpetration of interpersonal violence. The IVI is a dichotomous scale (yes/no), that consists of two parts a) the suffered violence (e.g., *Hurting - they caused me physical damage, like hurting, tearing, pinching, slapping, kicking, among others?*) and b) the practiced violence (e.g., *Disqualify -making another person believe that he does not have good qualities*), composed of 31 and 32 items, respectively. In response to the items, the participant indicates who perpetrated it and who the victims were, among other information. Cronbach's alpha for suffered violence scale was .77.

Social Desirability Scale (SDS-20; Almiro et al., 2016). This is a self-report measure, composed of 20 items, of dichotomous response (yes/no). Each item is quoted with 1 point if the answer is in the sense of social desirability, 0 points if it is in the opposite direction. Prior to data analyses, all participants were screened for social desirability, ruling out adolescents who scored over $M = 14.73$, as they showed a tendency to transmit socially desirable responses rather than choosing responses that were a true reflection of their behaviors or feelings (Grimm, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for total scale was .80.

Statistical Analysis

Frequencies and proportions were calculated to evaluate parental violence. Student *t*-tests were calculated to analyze differences between age groups and male and female victims of parental violence. Data was organized and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 26.0.

RESULTS

Group Comparisons

There is clear evidence of a large amount of aggressive behaviors suffered by adolescents from their parents, whether before, during or after the COVID-19 lockdown (see Table 1).

Wave 1. Of the total number of participants who reported having been victims of aggression ($n = 1330$), 453 (31.4%) reported aggression within the family. Of these victims, 450 (29.2%) adolescents reported having been victims of psychological aggression, 396 (27.4%) of physical aggression, and 34 (2.4%) of sexual aggression. It should be noted that there are statistically significant differences in the sex variable, where there were more girls ($n = 740$) reporting being victims than boys ($n = 704$; $t(1442) = -3.743$, $p = .000$). For age groups, there were no significant differences in victimizing behaviors.

Wave 2. Of the total number of participants who reported having been victims of aggression ($n = 986$), 389 (27.3%) were victims of aggression within the family. Of the victims in the family context, 366 (25.6%) adolescents reported having been victims of psychological aggression, 258 (18.1%) of physical aggression, and 11 (0.8%) of sexual aggression (see Table 1). Again, there are statistically significant differences in the sex variable: more girls ($n = 255$) were victims of family violence, than boys ($n = 134$; $t(1425) = -3.57$, $p = .000$). For age groups, there were no significant differences in victimizing behaviors.

Wave 3. Of the total number of participants who reported having been victims of aggression ($n = 431$), 189 (23.8%) were victims of aggression within the family. Of the victims in the family context, 170 (21.4%) adolescents reported having been victims of psychological aggression, 102 (12.8%) of physical aggression, and 4 (0.5%) of sexual aggression. Once again, we found statistically significant differences in the sex variable, with more adolescent girls ($n = 125$), reporting having been victims than boys ($n = 64$; $t(792) = -2.03$, $p = .043$). For age groups, there were also no significant differences in victimizing behaviors.

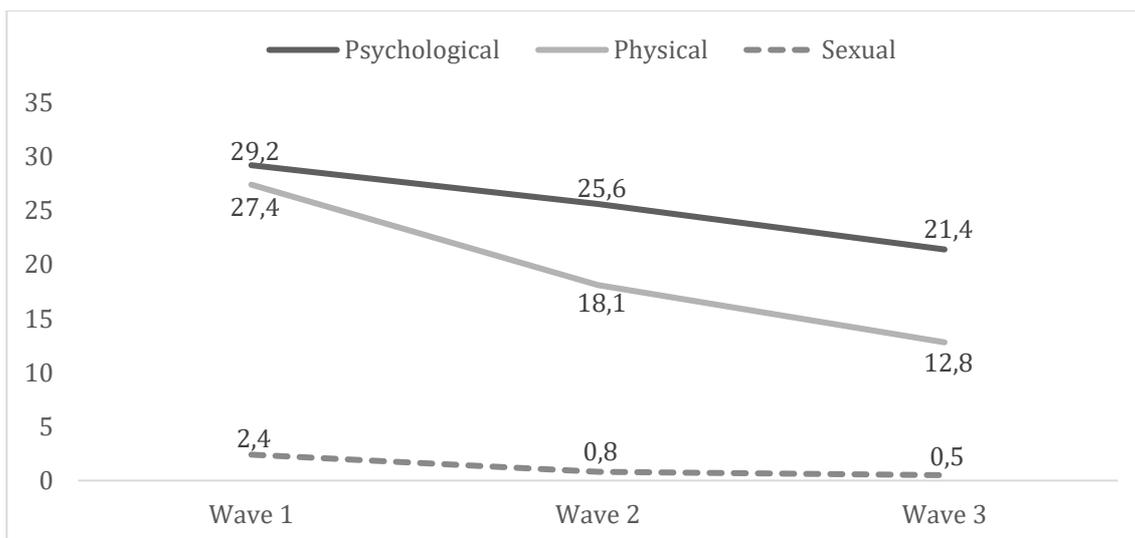


Figure 2. Percentage of interpersonal violence (psychological, physical, and sexual) victimization in the three Wave samples.

DISCUSSION

The current study provides information regarding parents' aggressive behaviors perpetrated on adolescents before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown in Portugal, providing a better understanding of the specific adolescent abuse risks during the most recent world pandemic. More importantly, the study demonstrated higher rates of physical, sexual, and psychological parental abuse; although results show that adolescents reported a reduction of violence perpetrated by their parents during and after the COVID-19 lockdown, compared with data collected a few months earlier. This decline may result from the fact that education personnel (teachers, counselors and others) kept in regular contact with families during the COVID-19 lockdown, using some form of remote education platform. More evidence is needed concerning the effects of remote education during the COVID-19 lockdown in child maltreatment prevention and comparing specific samples.

Although, in general, the prevalence of aggression behaviors by parents is reduced in the three samples, i.e., the prevalence is lower in the 3rd wave in relation to the 1st wave, higher rates of maltreatment are still be found (from 23.8% to 31.4%, in this study). Moreover, the psychological impact can be wide, lasting and even exacerbated due to the fact of confinement. In fact, in previous experiences with aspects common to the situation caused by COVID-19, investigators have reported a high presence of psychological distress, such as depression, stress, irritability, and post-traumatic stress symptoms associated with quarantine (Hawryluck et al., 2004; Brooks et al., 2020) with lasting effects continuing for years after the event (Liu et al., 2012). Hence, despite its positive effect in reducing the number of new infected cases, the mobility restriction and social isolation associated with quarantine are major concerns for families' psychological wellbeing (Spinelli et al. 2021). Thus, action and awareness programs on pandemic experience should be developed and subsequently evaluated to verify their effects at the behavioral and mental health level. Moreover, clinicians should be vigilant in supporting families most at risk.

Certain limitations of the current study should be taken into account when interpreting the results. This study doesn't compare rates of violence exposure before, during, and after lockdown due to COVID-19. In future studies, it may be important to understand if, even with less violence during the COVID-19 lockdown, we could have adolescent exposure to intimate partner violence and neglect and the non-direct aggression. The fast lockdown process made it difficult to establish specific methodologies and this research focuses only on the proportion of parental violence behaviors. It's surely an important practical and academic exercise, based on rigorous data; though a longitudinal study with the same participants in all Waves were preferable. Despite this, samples consist of participants from the same national educational institutions. Despite the limitations, it is noteworthy that most studies carried out during previous pandemics and since the start of COVID-19 have examined the psychological consequences in the general population. They have, however, left the study of effects on parents and children, with exceptions (Brooks et al., 2020, Spinelli et al., 2021), mostly unexplored. The present study can thus lift the veil so that future studies are interested in acquiring a deeper understanding of family processes, together with protective and risk factors (Wang et al., 2020).

As stated, despite the decrease in aggression behaviors, the prevalence of family aggression behaviors continues to have a high prevalence. This permanence of behaviors during and after the COVID-

19 lockdown should encourage stakeholders and policy makers to implement an interdisciplinary intervention oriented to violence in family relationships to mitigate the negative effects of restrictions that may be implemented and promote a healthy lifestyle. Actually, lockdown and social distancing are efficient ways to deal with the pandemic, but these experiences may have consequences for people's wellbeing. However, the greater focus of public institutions and government organizations is mainly on physical health and the prevention and containment of the disease, neglecting the impact of mental health. As mentioned by Spinelli et al. (2021), stable mental health is one of the keys to fighting this ongoing pandemic and to restoring a post-pandemic society. The well-being of parents and children must, therefore, be under surveillance, as problems in this area may have long-lasting implications.

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Historial do artigo

Recebido	29/09/2020
Aceite	01/11/2021
Publicado online	08/04/2022
Publicado	30/06/2022

